

## The Many Spices of Life!

With salt used excessively to give all sorts of concoctions a spark of taste, we have been advised to find spices that can impart intriguing taste to food. Salt is important: we can't live without it given that our species evolved from the wide salty sea. Heart, lungs, nerves, muscles – all our body parts require salt, but just a soupcon, not heaps!

The distinction between what is an herb and what is a spice is academic and of little concern to gardeners and cooks who use fresh basil minced over sliced tomatoes and mozzarella in September and in December sprinkle it from a jar.

One prodigiously edible family is the umbelliferae identified by their umbrella-like flowering. This carrot family includes angelica, caraway, chervil, celery, cumin, dill, and parsley. Many of these plant parts are available dried: some, such as cilantro, parsley and dill are found in produce sections in packets of fresh leaves. Others you can nurture year-round on a sunny windowsill.

For a quick fix stores offer blends of various seasonings in jars, but it would be more fun and less expensive to concoct your own to suit your family's taste. For Italian flavor you can mix basil, oregano, and thyme in 6,2,1 proportions. Garlic, the indispensable, is a vegetable, not part of this discussion.

For Indian cooking, one choice is curry powder, a blend of turmeric, coriander, cumin, ginger, cardamom and others. Curry powder, I'm told is integrated into the recipe at the sautéing-of-the-onion stage, not used as an add-on. I've also read that if a recipe calls for another Indian blend, garam masala, you can substitute allspice.

When we can raise so many herbs by the kitchen door, it astonishes us that for centuries discovery journeys were taken in the search for spices, a commodity important in commerce. Surely the longest business trip in history was Marco Polo's twenty year journey in the 13<sup>th</sup> century through the territories of the Kublai Khan. In a side trip to the islands of Java and Sumatra he speaks of the rich commodities of those areas: pepper, nutmeg, spikenard (member of the valerian family from the roots of which a costly ointment was made), galangal (in the ginger family), cubebs (in the pepper family) and cloves. These treasures were also valued as medicines.

It sounds like a really tall tale to say that there was a botanist and spice trader named Peter Pepper. Actually, he wasn't. He was French and his name was Pierre Poivre, which surely translates to Peter Pepper. Born in 1719 to a merchant of ribbon and braid, he was fascinated by plants. His eventually detained journey to the priesthood involved adventures in the East Indies that echoed those of Marco Polo.

Since in the 18<sup>th</sup> century the Dutch East India Company had a monopoly on both growing and selling cloves and nutmeg, the merchant in Mr. Poivre thought those spices could be spirited from areas under control of the Dutch East India Company to the benefit of himself and France. Despite situations that could be grist for the mill of fantasy fiction, he failed for decades. However, the plants he managed to send back to his botanist friends in France made him

famous. The list includes a few spices, wild nutmeg, cinnamon, and the Madagascar clove and also garden treasures such as lilac, hydrangea, and irises. He discovered more than 800 unknown species. Decades later when Poivre was in charge of the Botanical Garden in Mauritius, he was able to plant cloves and nutmeg that survived, breaking the Dutch monopoly. Today Brazil and Madagascar are the strongest market source for cloves: nutmeg, and its outer covering known as mace, still comes mainly from Indonesia and from Grenada in the West Indies.

Probably few of us cook with an exorbitantly expensive flavoring, saffron. Saffron comes from *Crocus sativus*, the bulb that produces a reddish purple flower in fall and is native to Greece but widely grown in non-tropical areas. It is easy to understand the cost when you consider it takes about a quarter of a million flowers to make a pound of saffron. The large red stigma has to be hand-pulled from the blossom as soon as it opens and dried. When it is dry it becomes orange/yellow and is used as flavoring and coloring in food as well as a dye. Plants have provided stories for generations and don't you suppose there are more stories in those plants waiting to be discovered?